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The intercultural dialogue through the Communities of Practice

Silvia Guetta

The Stimulus

To create an experience of a Community of good practice with as basic themes interreligious and intercultural dialogue has been a challenge, and at the same time, a strong cultural urge. To speak about a Community of good practice means to press people or groups to get in touch with each other and use their experiences in this matter as contents of their dialogue. Starting a reflection on what one has experimented also means being able and willing to put oneself at stake, opening oneself to new knowledge in order to modify, enrich and also give new meaning to one's own work and social involvement. In the specific context regarding the culture of peace, opening a space of exchange involving different fields of research and intervention with regard to themes of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, has also signified treating this subject of study in a coherent and considerable way. The dialogue between more parties and/or different ideas, traditions, politics becomes more and more a democratic necessity.

However, promoting the dialogue is easier said than done because for its realisation, sustainment and maintenance, numerous proficiencies are necessary, proficiencies that entwine, with regard to the contexts, with the articulated potential of the people. The dialogue may occur in the first place, if those that are talking are at least willing to try a dialogue. The complete absence of will to realise this experience of confrontation is an impediment for the opening of the first doors of communication. If the dialogue is meant to have its effect of transformation and change, it must comprehend and exceed difference.

Classical culture presents us dialogue as an essential cognitive experience, within a dimension of talk and comparison, being able that way to enter, just like in the case of Plato, into knowledge of metaphysics searching for the truth. But in any case the dialogue presents itself as a possibility of confrontation and opening. This however always requires that those that participate are in some way competent in the argument that is being considered, and capable and willing to communicate that competence. With

a communication that is, that may help to clear the contingent situation in order to outline a new one. Change that can be realised thanks to a process of deconstruction of prior knowledge or former *Idola* to say it with Bacon, and that puts itself as instrument of criticality and continuous search of the verifiable and provable.

A Community of good practice, in particular if activated in the beginning within an area of virtual networks, may favour the overcoming of choke-points and alignments that, however good the intentions and specific wish to connect are, in many cases remain difficult to solve. Even with the difficulties and the limits of the virtual contact that always makes the knowing of the reality incomplete, because it only shows a part of the depth and the complexity that characterises the behaviour and the being of man, still the instrument of the network *on line* may help to cross the barriers and blocks set by deep rooted and intractable conflicts, thus permitting in any case to open spaces of meeting and exchange.

The choice to organise and involve researchers, operators, activists, educators etc in this experience of contact and exchange has had various motivations. One of these has been the awareness that the web could offer that *neutral*, but at the same time hospitable and possible environment for the experimentation of the dialogues that otherwise would not have been possible to set up in live presence.

Another motivation has been the necessity to render visible how, and in what way, in the different contexts, as well as where the conflict is present, it is possible to work promoting the culture of peace. Yet another possibility is to share with researchers and operators of different provenance, different ways of thinking, different social and cultural involvement and battles for the respect of people and their rights. We are aware that the presentation of what is virtually done, would have needed a formalisation of the experience itself in order to be spread, and that this formalisation would also have worked as a device of valuation and render transferable the very experience. This because we believe that the educational work for the development of the culture of peace must be considered a highly professional commitment and that it must not merely make use of the good will and the common sense of the operators, but of specific know how and qualifications.

This kind of Community of good practise can therefore exercise an important role in the development of intercultural and interreligious dialogues capable of activating a process of culture of peace. Returning to the model of education of peace of Padfoort, the community of practise has also wanted to experiment the model of equipollence and of exchange at par between the persons involved in the dialogue and in the process that leads to the development of the culture of peace¹.

¹ P. Patfoort, *Costruire la nonviolenza. Per una pedagogia dei conflitti*, Molfetta (Bari), La Meridiana, 2000.

Patfoort sustains that if in human relations we don't achieve a relation of equivalence between people, we continue, in spite of our good will, to legitimate relations of exclusion. If we activate and maintain relations where, returning to her model, a subject or a group of subjects, or a group that identifies itself and communicates to be a subject (or a group) *M* (*major*), with regard to another subject or group that is identified as *m* (*minor*), we always implicitly give room to the rooting and development of different forms of violence. For many this model that materialises above all in the relation adult-child, seems the most normal, a natural way to establish the relation and solve the conflict. For Patfoort however this model is not the only one, nor the natural one of human beings. An approach to get out of a situation of conflict or different points of view, is the one of model E (equivalence) that permits us to defend ourselves, our point of view, but maintains a position of respect of the other and of non attack or collision².

Sharing a model

According to the model of Wenger what characterizes the CoP (Community of Practice) is essentially the possibility of developing and creating new knowledge not only inside a social and shared dimension, but, and above all, in the logic of the exchange and the reciprocity. Like Wenger sustains³ the working, acting with as a goal the reaching of a result, a change, an achievement, means bringing to fruition, or experiment practises. These, on their own, are strictly and extensively tied to the tacit, the implied, the 'theoretic' that orients its direction, e defines them in their meaning. An acting sustained by a thinking and by a hearing that, in that acting itself, becomes specific. Hence practices that have their origin in experiences in the social atmosphere and have that destiny, make us ponder again about the fact that learning isn't exclusively an individual process continuously relating to the context within which said learning process takes place, namely the social context. The awareness of this process creates the continuous necessity not only to create the ability of group activity and/or the cooperation within the process of formation but also to recognise in the learning products their social nature. The consideration as introduced by the CoP wises up to the idea that not only the process of learning is important but also the way of integration of the process with approaches of social, participatory and cooperative kind. The process of learning needs social and cultural force to be able to come to fruition and to establish itself.

However it needs to be said that the importance and the potential of this experience may be found exactly in admitting the circularity-reciprocity of

² P. Patfoort, *Io non voglio, tu non vuoi. Manuale di educazione non violenta*, Torino, EGA, 2001.

³ E. Wenger, *Comunità di pratica. Apprendimento, significato e identità*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, Editore, 2006.

the nature of the product of learning, a product that, like mentioned above, will not be considered only in its theoretical nature, but that, on the contrary, it implies just that knowledge of doing that renders the theoretical knowledge practical and real.

This type of reflection could lead us to explore the concept of practice, which is exactly what sustains the sense of the community itself, inside out. A practice which has indeed sense if it may be repeated, shared, measured, just to say it with the by now famous words of Wenger, and where the learning is strictly tied to the activity and the relations which we model in the relationship between ourselves and the world. This collective learning translates itself (eventually) in practices that reflect the exercise of our activities, as well as the social relations that accompany us. Such practises are therefore an exclusive asset of a sort of community, created in time by the continuous development of a common activity. Thus it is correct to define such aggregations as *community of practises*⁴.

Returning to underline as much as has been said before, regarding the nature of this 'community' experience, it is possible to point out that it enriches itself by the specificity of being an instrument that can feed new dialogues for new cultures of peace. As a matter of fact differently from many experiences that see the circulation of information in function or as an expression of a work group already defined and characterised, in the experience like proposed by the researchers of the Trans-disciplinary UNESCO Chair, it works, almost on the contrary of what happens in the communities of practise of a working context, like an appeal, a stimulus for involvement and participation. The practises therefore open new opportunities to meet and need, in order to grow and stay alive, to be fed by the reinforcement of the sharing of the choice and the critical reading of the relation between social-educative issues and the practices of intervention.

A further motivation has been the offering the members of the group a possibility to use experiences that might be alike or not, similar or original, in order to seek new solutions to old problems or to problems that are just rising and often still in search of a solution. The variety of the possibilities, the range of interests, fields of research and achievements, want to open up spaces of knowledge to a multi- and/or inter-cultural, multi- and/or inter-religious dimension.

The construction of a simple *e-group* of easy access, has been conceived with the focus on the idea of creating a virtual space of encounter that would permit everybody to retrieve the material, the information, the contacts, and the quality and typology of past experiences. In line with 'traditional' CoP's that are characterised by the fact of being a meeting place of common memory of the groups of the community of practice, this experience has had as a goal, the actual creation of a common memory, the creation of an archive

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

from where in various moments of time and of situations, it would be possible to retrieve its material and instruments. Amongst the characteristics of the CoP is the fact of not just being of a contingent character, but, on the contrary, to be the centre of a place that activates historical memory and to lend the community itself depth and profoundness.

As the network is not orientated to sustain and develop a particular work context and share professional competences, it therefore applies itself to the activity of exchange and motivations of the search for partners. It is beyond doubt that the lack of common work and goals that generally are shared by restricted groups and of immediate products and results, renders the internal dynamics more difficult and sometimes undermines the participation of the members in the discussion.

In any case the experience activated by the research group of this teaching post has favoured the development and the circulation of the practises for the interreligious and intercultural dialogue, always considering them as social practises, like doing something, that characterizes and defines itself within a historical context that gives it a sense and a significance. What the Community of practises contributes to is really the going beyond the horizons of the social, the social which is tied to the contingent and to the context of reference, introducing into circulation the experiences, the social and the context of reference in that way assume different positions and leave the possibility of reading them according different prospects. In this way the opening to the decentralization of comprehension and interpretation, are important elements of a community of practises engaged in dialogue and in development of not only new professional or operative skills, but also of new competences of cultural and social change.

What needs to be considered, keeping in mind the reflection of Wenger, is that the practise, for as much as it may be communicated and rendered visible subject of debate, stimulus for the group and for the movement of new ideas, it always assumes also a 'silent' ⁵, a something that does not emerge immediately, that works as a substrate and sometimes as an aggregating element to the practise itself. At times, that implicit, that silent, has a pregnant significance, that may outline the total sense of the practise itself. Cultural references, social problems, operative limits, but also the lack of knowing, partial and simple interpretations, may be traced in a silent that remains at the background of the communication. This is an opening to the question regarding the availability and capacity of hearing and the comprehension that go further than the simple communication. If it is true that the practise may become stimulus and experience to implement in another cultural and social context, it is also true that one needs to know how to give it the depth, the complexity and the references that generated it. The silent, sustains Wenger, "is that that is represented and assumed in hypothesis. It includes the langua-

⁵ *Ibidem* p. 59.

ge, the instruments, the documents, the images, the symbols, the well defined roles, the specific criteria, the codified procedures, the internal rules and the contracts that the various practices render explicit with a complete series of aims. But it also includes the implicit relations, the tacit conventions, the subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, the recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, the underlying assumptions shared world views”⁶.

This long citation makes the complexity of the implicit clear, but also the implicit nets and knots that are interwoven into the cloth of the practises. A ‘hidden’ dimension that however can give it colour and brightness or stiffness and opacity. Most surely the CoP puts action into important emotional dimensions, activates new circuits of interest and curiosity but may also unclothe a sense of confusion, of indecision, of incompetence. The seeing propagated proposals/practises already made and realised, the seeing propagated pressures and difficulties of situations that sometimes prevent the reaching of results hoped for, leaves room to indecision and to insecurity. Emotions and sentiments play an important part in learning experiences and professional activity of the educators. For this reason we think it is necessary to underline how the practises that involve the emotive dimension, need to be participated. This means that in addition to the discussed contents, the description of undertaken actions and the valuations of the experiences already past, the emotions, the sentiments and the feelings of fondness that the educational practises have generated should be expressed. Like the doing and the thinking, also the feeling of emotions, sentiments and affections, even though they have been cognitively elaborated and organized, are necessary to cross the bridges of communication and construct a positive and transformative dialogue.

The participation is an aspect that qualifies the learning process because it renders it sociably sharable and makes it a new potential of social transformation in a democratically speaking way. In the educational field participation has had a lot of attention on theoretical level, but a lot less in action and on practical level. It does in fact disturb the model of ‘duty’ and ‘where to be’ which is rigidly placed in the formational and didactical models of the formal educational systems. If, like we have already stated, the CdP is an active and dynamic context of learning, it is necessary, in order to obtain good results of involvement in what is being done, that the person participates and is conscious that a certain action and practice answers his “needs, those expressed and those still more latent, and that the answer that it proposes is satisfactory because it does not reduce, but enlarges the degree of realisation of the subject itself within himself and in the relation with the world that surrounds him, in that case we are in the presence of fruitful dynamics of learning: on the one hand the subject accepts the new knowledge, of whatever nature it

⁶ E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, NY, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 47.

might be and welcomes it in his system of representation of reality and, on the other hand reshapes himself on it modifying, for as much as needed, the system”⁷. To work in the perspective of participation is therefore thought as a superior relational level because it involves the people contemporaneously on an emotional, cognitive and motivational level. If well led and supported the participation provides the push so that the practices meet and feed each other creating a favourable surrounding for the forming of work groups. But it is also the motor that makes the group proceed as wished, even if diversified, and generates other good practices. The participation thus puts the dimension of pleasure, of satisfaction, of sharing into light. In this sense it lends a fundamental standard that values the entire professional activity, through the valuation of the results of the work done or the commitment it is possible to capture where action has been undertaken and what influence it has on the result: the rendering professionally responsible.

⁷ P. Orefice, *Didattica dell'ambiente*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1993, p. 201.

